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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: SCHOLARS DESCRIBE EPRDF CONSOLIDATION OF
CONTROL (PART I OF V)

REF: A. ADDIS ABABA 1111
[1](#)B. ADDIS ABABA 1154
[1](#)C. ADDIS ABABA 1223

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

PART I OF V. THIS FIVE-PART CABLE DETAILS ETHIOPIAN
SCHOLARS' VIEWS ON THE ETHIOPIAN POLITY.

Summary

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Following the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's (EPRDF) landslide victory in the April local elections (ref A), Deputy Political-Economic Counselor spoke separately with ten scholars to canvass elites' opinions on the current Ethiopian polity. The scholars divided roughly into two camps: Pluralists, who favored participatory democracy, and Statists, who favored a dominant EPRDF. The Ethiopian scholars unanimously assessed that the EPRDF has, for now, ended Ethiopia's experiment in multiparty democracy and is actively consolidating power and extending its authority throughout the economy, civil society and society writ large. For the foreseeable future, the scholars said, dialogue between the EPRDF and non-governmental actors or political opposition will diminish from a low baseline. Although the scholars agreed that the EPRDF, by virtue of its firm control of the state security apparatus, is currently the only party that can guarantee Ethiopia's stability, they collectively cautioned that the EPRDF's power play is, both by design and collateral effect, weakening state and societal institutions, eroding trust among peoples and groups, damaging the economy and, ultimately, threatening Ethiopia's stability. This Part I of a five-part cable outlines the scholars' views on the EPRDF's consolidation of control. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (S/NF) Following the ruling EPRDF's landslide victory in the virtually uncontested April 13 and 20, 2008 elections, which effectively eliminated any political space for opposition parties at the neighborhood, city, district, and zonal levels, Deputy Political-Economic Counselor spoke separately with ten scholars, each in conversations ranging from one to two hours, to canvass opinion on the current Ethiopian polity from elites not affiliated with political parties. The scholars included members of the Addis Ababa University (AAU) and Addis Ababa University Law School (AAULAW) faculties, as well as members of several Addis Ababa-based think tanks and civil society organizations. While most had spent significant portions of their careers in

Addis Ababa, their provinces of origin reflected Ethiopia's diversity and included the Amhara, Tigray, Oromiya and Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's regions. Several scholars had formerly been senior officials either in the EPRDF government or in the Dergue regime. Most identified themselves as secular or mainstream Orthodox Christians. No Muslims were interviewed. The discussions were held from April 21 to May 1 at the Embassy and at various locations in Addis Ababa.

Pluralists and Statists

¶3. (S/NF) The scholars roughly divided into two camps. The Pluralists insisted that participatory democracy is the only way forward for the country, given its diversity of regions, languages and ethnicities and its various religious traditions. The Statists, in contrast, argued that a dominant EPRDF is necessary to generate economic growth and guarantee, through firm control of the military and police, the security and stability necessary for Ethiopia's welfare and development. The latter position reflects the EPRDF's "developmental state" rationale for consolidating power under its banner of "revolutionary democracy" (ref B), which posits that the ruling party will, sequentially, (i) secure the country, (ii) centrally direct economic development and (iii) open political space at some indeterminate time when, in the ruling party's determination, the relevant national institutions (including the press and civil society) are mature enough to handle greater political expression.

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"Ethiopia Is A Military Government"

¶4. (S/NF) The scholars, Pluralists and Statists alike, were unanimous in their assessment that the EPRDF has, for now, ended Ethiopia's experiment in multiparty democracy. "Ethiopia is, for all intents and purposes, a military government," remarked a Statist think tank expert with close ties to the ruling party. He added that "Power alone is the glue that keeps the EPRDF together. The 1,000 or more EPRDF cadres control politics at every level." A Pluralist think tank expert, and former Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) member prior to the 2001 TPLF schism, said "There has been a reversal of democraticization. Political space is now closed. Major political players cannot participate in national reconstruction. Democratic elections are about processes and institutions. Ethiopia has neither." Another Pluralist think tank expert observed that "There is no real opposition left in the country. Democratic rule is not in place. The (April 2008) local election results were far from reality. Silence (expressed via low voter turnout) is opposition in itself. We failed to bring changes (in national elections) in 2005 and now we are back to authoritarianism." The former TPLF think tank expert concluded, "The April 2008 local elections exposed the ruling party as illegitimate. Legitimacy in Ethiopia demands nationalism and democracy. The joke on the streets is that Eritrea is a restaurant with no democracy on the menu, while Ethiopia is a restaurant with democracy on the menu but no food."

No Alternatives In Sight

¶5. (S/NF) The scholars all agreed that the mainstream Ethiopian political opposition is in disarray and cannot contest effectively the EPRDF's supremacy. Predictably, the Statists attributed this state of affairs largely to the opposition's own failings, while the Pluralists decried what they described as the systematic dismantling of the opposition by the EPRDF after the 2005 elections. An AAU administrator and marginal Statist observed that "There are no political organizations with clear philosophies and

agendas that can be alternatives to the EPRDF. The opposition is weak and disparate, with no clear national constituencies or agendas. (The banned nationalist insurgencies) Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) are not on the doorstep and the (EPRDF proxy) Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) is very effective for the EPRDF in Oromiya." The think tank expert with EPRDF ties said "The opposition is too hopelessly divided to run state security effectively. The message from the local elections is 'nobody cares if the EPRDF is in place because it will enforce security.'" A Pluralist AAULAW faculty member agreed that "The ruling party's political and economic might overwhelms the opposition. The public is subdued. There are so many discontents now, stemming from the (2005) imprisonment (of opposition, civil society and media figures and supporters) and its consequences. So many have suffered, or disappeared. The psychological impact is that people decide to tow the line, hide their views. No one is enthusiastic about political expression. It is better to be seen as non-confrontational." Another Pluralist AAULAW faculty member concurred, "After the 2005 elections, the hopes of the people were dashed and many lost interest in the ongoing politics. People are bitter about this government but they keep to themselves."

The EPRDF Is Consolidating Control...

16. (S/NF) Pluralist and Statist scholars alike agreed that, even though the opposition has been crippled and sidelined, the EPRDF is aggressively consolidating power and extending its authority throughout the economy, civil society and society writ large. Since this trend continues to accelerate, prospects for reversal are minimal. Rather, the scholars predicted that, for the foreseeable future, dialogue between the EPRDF and non-governmental actors or political opposition will diminish from a low baseline. A Pluralist

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think tank expert explained, "The ruling party is establishing itself as the ruling party for a long time to come. There is no dialogue in parliament, only majority rule. Without a strong opposition in Parliament, chances for opening democratic processes are slim." The marginal Statist AAU administrator concurred, noting that "Power is now being consolidated in one party from the grass roots to Parliament. Parliament is multiparty in name only. Only one party holds the discussions and passes the laws. The EPRDF is adamant that this is the best way to run the country." Likewise, the former TPLF think tank expert said "The trends in the media and civil society (where the EPRDF has been drafted new laws to assert control in these areas (ref C)) are not accidental. The EPRDF oscillates between panic and arrogance, and they are in arrogant mode now." A Pluralist civil society advocate added, "The EPRDF will use all its resources to stifle the opposition. The party is establishing relationships with the youth and identifying places where power might emerge. It is authoritarian and there is no way out. Ethiopians want competitive elections, but the EPRDF wants 98 percent support. They can never be satisfied. They want to control everything."

END PART I OF V. NEXT: SCHOLARS DESCRIBE THE WEAKENING OF THE STATE, ECONOMIC MISMANAGEMENT
YAMAMOTO